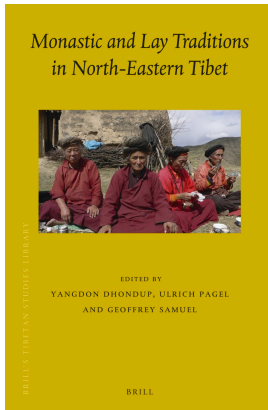


## REVIEW: *MONASTIC AND LAY TRADITIONS IN NORTH-EASTERN TIBET*

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Yangdon Dhondup, Ulrich Pagel, and Geoffrey Samuel (eds). 2013. *Monastic and Lay Traditions of North-Eastern Tibet*. Leiden and Boston: Brill. viii. +244. Four Maps, fifteen illustrations, preface, index. Volume 33, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library. ISBN: 978-9004255692 (hardcover, 112.50USD).

*Monastic and Lay Traditions in North-Eastern Tibet*, edited by Yangdon Dhondup, Ulrich Pagel, and Geoffrey Samuel, is the product of a 2011 workshop convened at St. Michael's College, Llandaff, Cardiff. Although the conference's focus was the tantric practitioner community of the Reb kong region (Ch. Tongren), the resultant volume expands the scope of inquiry to include surrounding areas as well as monastic communities. The editors have organized the volume's nine chapters into three sections, the first on the Dge lugs pa monastic establishment, the second on Rnying ma pa and Bon tantric communities, and finally 'Ritual and Performance in Contemporary Reb kong'. While the chapters are all informative and scholarly, providing new, important empirical detail on an under-researched subject, several tend toward the descriptive. The most successful contributions, however, present their findings within larger analytical and contextual frameworks, giving their chapters explanatory weight beyond the more narrow confines of their studies.

After a short preface by the editors, Geoffrey Samuel provides a useful historical and ethnographic introduction to the Reb kong region, which he situates within the "multiethnic context of A mdo" (5). Noting that "both Reb kong itself and the wider A mdo region

today presents a complex ethnic patchwork" (7), Samuel suggests that ethnic, religious and political identities have long been fluid and should be investigated as such, adding, "The rigid process of identity-definition within modern states tend to mitigate against doing this, as do the complexities of contemporary politics in culturally Tibetan regions" (10). This is admittedly a formidable challenge, as Charlene Makley alludes to in her own chapter, requiring the researcher overcome a series of conceptual, logistical, and political obstacles. Nonetheless, although the subsequent chapters often refer to Amdo's frontier nature, except in the case of religious diversity *within* the region's Tibetan Buddhist and Bon communities, only rarely do the authors engage these knotty historical and social dynamics in a meaningful way.

Perhaps the volume's most fully conceived and delivered chapter is its first. In 'Remembering Monastic Revival: Stories from Reb Kong and Western Ba Yan', Jane Caple builds upon previous scholarship, including that of Makley and Hildegard Diemberger, in an effort to locate "emic perspectives" on religious revival in the post-Mao period (23). Examining oral and written accounts "produced by monks who were involved in the process of monastic revival," Caple argues,

Their rememberings add depth and texture to our knowledge of this period, contributing new empirical details and, moreover, an understanding beyond that contained within the narrative frame of state-society relations (23-24).

She finds that the revival of public religious practice in the early 1980s depended on a "social reordering and the re-formation or resurgence of the moral community underpinning monasticism in general and in the particular 'mass' form revived at this time" (31). Exploring the "public performance of monkhood through the wearing of monastic robes" and "the reclamation of monastic space," Caple describes

the reinscription of the social and spatial boundaries between lay and monastic communities that underpin the ethical relationship

between monks (in their roles as a field of merit and providers of ritual services) and the laity (in their roles as patrons) (32).

Lastly, Caple argues that present-day rememberings of the early period of monastic revival affirms a "moral past" that "allows room for ethically motivated reforms" in a perceived period of "moral decline that threatens the continuity of monasticism" (43).

Makley's own short, thought-provoking contribution, 'Reb kong's Klu rol and the Politics of Presence', is perhaps the volume's most theoretically and methodologically sophisticated. Focusing on a dispute over the authenticity of a 'deity medium' during Reb kong's increasingly well-known and commercialized harvest festival (Klu rol), Makley attempts

to see beyond the 'freeze frames' of most tourist and state portrayals of *Klu rol*, and indeed of scholarly accounts of the festival, to appreciate the actually dynamic politics and ongoing high stakes of these performances for both ordinary Tibetans and for state officials (190).

She suggests that Tibetan and Inner Asian "politics of legitimacy, power, and causation [...] are manifest most importantly in what I see as a ritualized *demand for presence* among Tibetans" (190, italics original). While acknowledging "that legitimate presence has always been ambivalent or indeterminate in these Tibetan frontier regions especially" (191), Makley argues that in the post-Mao period there has been an "unacknowledged agreement among residents not to publicly address the histories and political economies of specifically Tibetan sources of (divine) authority" (192). This "silent stand-off," made momentarily audible (if unintelligible to most onlookers) by the *Klu rol* dispute, has had the effect of silencing "speech and performance that would threaten CCP legitimacy, even as the reforms seemed to allow a great, so-called 'revival' or 'rebuilding' of Tibetan practices and institutions" (192). Makley concludes with several methodological suggestions and their implications for researchers willing to pursue the "politics of presence."

In 'Money, Butter, and Religion: Remarks on the Participation in the Large-Scale Collective Rituals of Rep kong Tantrists', Nicolas Sihlé seeks to identify the motivation for participation in "optional,"

large-scale, extra-local rituals among Buddhist and Bon po tantric specialists. Sihlé asks:

according to what concerns do the religious specialists choose to take part or not? And what do these elements tell us about these specialists and for instance the possible constraints and tensions within which they operate (166)?

The questions are intriguing, even if Sihlé's answer is less provocative and surprising than he suggests, especially to recent generations of students of Tibetan history conscious of the interconnectivity of the social, political, economic, and religious. Noting that tantric specialists are largely lay practitioners who in many cases are also heads of households, Sihlé argues that participation may often come down to the weighing of anticipated material benefits against potential costs, in other words, "motivation of a primarily material, economic nature" (166). Sihlé confirms, however, that the boundaries between 'religious' and 'economic' motivations are porous. For example, he readily admits that:

the economic dimension may also in a number of cases be intimately and complexly related to matters of prestige and perceived qualities of the masters and the rituals they oversee and support (179).

This, of course, underscores why the "emic perspective" pursued by Caple and Makley is both so attractive and elusive.

The volume's most ambitious contribution is perhaps Paul Nietupski's chapter, 'Understanding Religion and Politics in A mdo'. Nietupski writes, "The different taxonomies or shifting clusters of religions and associated political visions co-existing in A mdo can be understood as a 'polythetic' phenomenon," a theory borrowed from biology in which inclusion demands, "there be only some common features in all communities; all communities do not have to possess a single common feature" (70). Taking the Sde khri Estate of Bla brang Monastery as a case study, Nietupski argues, "there were three main political structures in A mdo and at Bla brang," internal monastic

officials, nomadic lords, and monastic representatives (73). As such, he insists,

A mdo was not a place of anarchy, inhabited by uncivilized bandits, where the regional states and civilizations were not governed. [...] A mdo was not an empty wilderness, but a region with a distinctive political and religious heritage (81).

In seeking to demolish a presumption few scholars today would likely entertain, Nietupski asserts that A mdo should be considered a "recognizable unit, but that its unity was based on a criteria very different from that of other governments" (68). Yet, particularly in light of the region's other socio-religious communities, which Nietupski admits were excluded or only partially subject to these institutions (82), instead of a 'recognizable unit,' one wonders if this 'polythetic' framework renders A mdo so liminal that its analytical potential is lost.

Space limitations prevent full reviews of the remaining chapters, all of which contain important empirical research. In 'Rules and Regulations of the Reb kong Tantric Community', Yangdon Dhondup continues her path-breaking exploration of the history of the Reb kong region with a focus on the development of its unique tantric community. Here she demonstrates that the members of the region's Rnying ma monasteries were primarily lay tantric practitioners, concluding, "It is this 'lay' component that not only explains the differences in their rules and monastic duties, but constitutes one of the main elements of their identity" (117). Building on Dhondup's earlier work, Heather Stoddard contributes biographical notes on the life of the founder of Reb kong's Rnying ma tantric community, 'Rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis (1688-1743), as well as a summary of some of his writings.

In the volume's one Tibetan-language chapter, Gedun Rabsal provides a political biography of Rong bo Monastery's seventh Shar Skal ldan rgya mtsho, Blo bzang 'phrin las lung rtogs rgya mtsho (1916-1978). Despite serving in the Communist regime in the 1950s, the author argues that the Shar Lama's "way of resistance was to use his religious education and standing" (49). Arrested in 1958 and

dying twenty years later while still incarcerated, Gedun Rabsal contends, "His life story parallels the history of modern Tibet" (49). Collin Millard's contribution focuses on Reb kong's Bon community, identified as A mdo's second largest (147). Millard employs existing literature as well as limited fieldwork to argue:

In Reb kong the unique religious institutions and sequence of annual rituals carried out by both Bon monastic and lay practitioners have served as a powerful resource in maintaining a sense of identity in the Bon community (141).

In the volume's concluding chapter, Dawn Collins turns our attention to tantric ritual dance (*'cham*). Although Collins concedes that her findings are preliminary, her proposal

that the practice of *'cham* reinforces both social hierarchies and those of religious institutions, and revitalises Tibetan identities through reinforcing connection to homelands and to an enacted visionary tradition (229)

seems well grounded and, as she suggests, worthy of further research.

In fact, in many cases the contributions to *Monastic and Lay Traditions of North Eastern Amdo* represent early stages of research, or are part of larger, ongoing studies. With the eventual publication of the fruits of that research, our understanding of the Reb kong region and its religious communities will expand greatly. Yet, despite A mdo's (and Reb kong more specifically) oft-mentioned status as a frontier, borderland, and liminal space, if there is an aggregate shortcoming to the volume it is its failure to satisfactorily investigate that diversity and complexity. Nonetheless, without exception the authors provide a great amount and variety of new empirical detail, and at times ask compelling questions and offer useful conceptual frameworks that give their studies significance beyond their immediate focus. Those interested in the Reb kong region of A mdo or Tibetan Buddhist and Bon tantric communities more generally would be wise to take note of this important volume.